

LA MAMA-RAMA!



Participants in La MaMa's 50th-anniversary gala, from left: on floor, Lois Weaver, Julie Atlas Muz, Mia Yoo; seated, John Jesurun, Peggy Shaw, Dario D'Ambrosi, Julie Taymor, Wallace Shawn, F. Murray Abraham; standing, Scott Wittman, Tom Murrin, Elizabeth Swados, Ping Chong, the Blue Man Group, Bill Irwin.

O

n Sunday, October 16, Ellen Stewart's La MaMa Experimental Theater Club will turn 50. Performance luminaries, former La MaMa babies—and that's practically everyone—will be on hand. The Manhattan block on East 4th Street between Second and the Bowery will be co-named Ellen Stewart Way. Last January, Ellen died at 91. For her funeral Mass, Ellen's community filled Saint Patrick's Cathedral, creating a moving East Village event. Ellen was the mother of Off Off Broadway. We were her family.

In 1964, as a young playwright needing a theater, I climbed two flights to La MaMa (then on East Ninth Street). I was greeted by a vibrant African-American lady, elegant in a sweater, slacks, and earrings. Smiling, she said, "You're home, honey."

At first Ellen supported La MaMa by designing clothes.

In the racist early 50s, from a lowly assistant at Saks Fifth Avenue, she rose to become its first black executive designer. When Americans refused to work for her, she hired European refugees, who called her "La Mama." Ellen had two gowns at Queen Elizabeth II's coronation ball. But her driving passion was theater.

Early on, during performances, Ellen would sit outside La MaMa's door, guarding against intruders. She always sliced through complications with humor, compassion, and authority. She made herself a public-relations marvel for our innovative kind of theater. New York became the theater's world capital partly because Ellen Stewart sponsored artists such as Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, and Harold Pinter. Around the globe she founded La MaMa troupes and created pieces with them. She also brought talented performers she found abroad back to New York. For 50 years La MaMa has been a bubbling cauldron of theatrical originality. Ellen's vision carries us into the future. "You can do it, honey." —JEAN-CLAUDE VAN ITALLIE

STYLED BY CAROLINE GROSSO; HAIR PRODUCTS BY REDKEN; MAKEUP PRODUCTS BY CHRISTIAN DIOR; HAIR BY HIKARI; MAKEUP BY CHRISTOPHER ARDOFF; GROOMING BY APRIL GREAVES; SET DESIGN BY AMY WILSON; FOR DETAILS, GO TO VF.COM/CREDITS